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Role playing is an approach to group discussion which attempts to get maximum participation through the acting out, by a few members of the group, of a concrete example of the problem or idea under discussion.

The group first decides on a concrete example, falling within the area of discussion, and decides character roles and setting. Next the action takes place, followed by discussion focused on the characters and setting. A list of suggested readings on the use of role playing is included.

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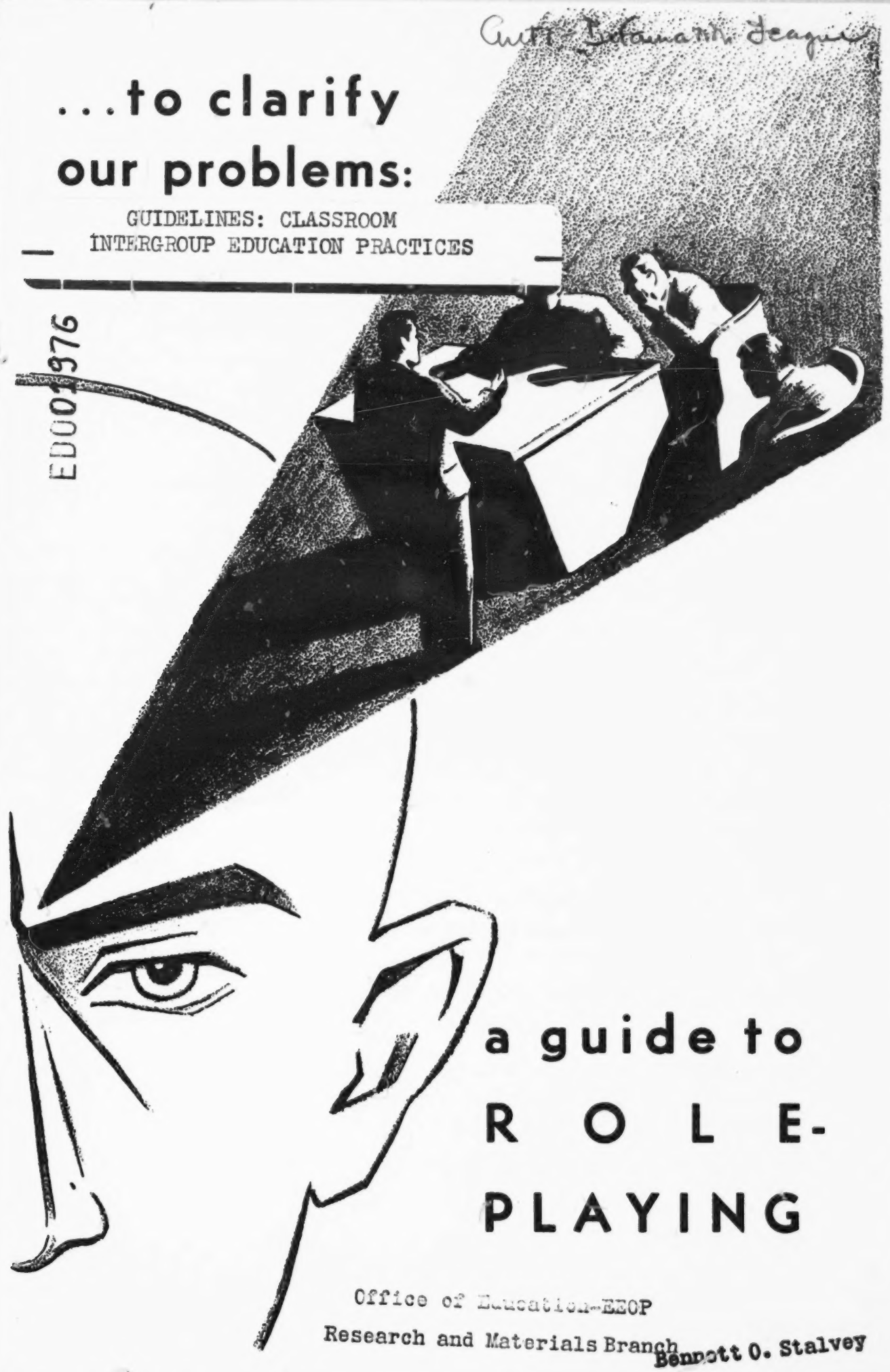

a guide to ROLE-PLAYING

Office of Education-EEOP
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. . . to clarify our problems:

a guide to role-playing

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. . . to clarify our problems:

The problem of getting total participation of all members of a discussion group has been the subject of considerable thinking and research. When people get together to discuss ideas or problems, it is desirable to get all members of the group to express opinions and ask questions. But everyone will agree that too often there are only a few members of a group that either get a chance or give themselves a chance to become involved in the discussion.

This pamphlet offers detailed instructions about one of the new techniques that have been developed to help achieve democratic participation of all members of a discussion group—*role-playing*. Although originally developed and used as a psychological method for individual and group therapy (psychodrama and sociodrama), role-playing is treated here only as a discussion technique.

What is role-playing when used this way? Speaking generally, it is an approach to discussion which attempts to get maximum participation through the acting out by a few members of the group of a concrete example of the problem or idea under discussion. The other members of the group watch and observe the spontaneous "performance." When the "performance" (the role-playing) is over, all members of the group join in a discussion of both the specific example and the general problem. It has been the experience of those who have used this technique that role-playing stimulates all members of a group to express their comments and questions about the problems under discussion. It is not a magic formula—but it would be fair to say that the method tends to involve and stimulate all members of a group.

The mechanics of role-playing discussions are discussed in detail in the pages that follow. While studying these instructions it would be well to keep in mind the main purpose of role-playing—to make a situation, idea or problem seem real, and, therefore, easier for your groups to understand and discuss.

a guide to role-playing

A discussion leader planning to use this guide should allow a minimum of thirty minutes for the actual role-playing and related discussion. Usually more time is necessary for its most productive use. For example, if the program calls for a main speaker with a short discussion period for questions, it would not be desirable to use this technique. Role-playing may be used where the time allowed for discussion is more flexible. As a group becomes more experienced with the method, it will become aware of such factors as time limitations, the most appropriate points at which role-playing may be introduced, and the like.

1. The group decides on a concrete problem falling within the area under discussion. The suggestions coming from the group may be listed on a blackboard so that the members will find it convenient to choose the one which seems most important to them.

For instance, the group might be discussing the issue of "quotas in educational institutions" (the undemocratic practice of limiting admissions of minority group members). One of the members may feel the group has come to a dead spot because of lack of information. Another person may feel that there is plenty of evidence from the recent studies on discrimination in education, but that the problem is how to use the facts most effectively. Still another person may feel that attempts to remedy the quota situation are blocked by those who are either indifferent or opposed to change. As this point is raised, there may be nods and murmurs of agreement from others in the group. The discussion leader has been listing these problems on the blackboard and now pauses to ask the group if there are any others—or if they would like to choose one already raised. The group agrees that the third point—"How to Meet Resistance"—is the most challenging. The leader then suggests that the group try to act out a situation which illustrates this problem—a situation which could actually occur.

2. After the problem is decided upon, the group works out a specific story illustrating the problem. They decide what characters should be involved (the number may range from two to five), the physical setting, the point in the story at which the role-playing should begin, and the attitudes and personalities of the characters. They should also come to clear agreement on the chief objectives to be realized in the role-playing scene.

In a group using role-playing for the first time, the discussion leader may arbitrarily assign individuals to take the various roles. As the members become more familiar with the method, they will usually volunteer to play the roles. The role-takers are given a few minutes to "warm up" or get the feeling of the roles they are about to play. Specific names—other than their own—help them get into their roles. The role-players should attempt to express the attitudes the group has assigned to the various characters as well as achieve the goals decided upon.

This might be the kind of a scene a group would want to role-play: A campus newspaper has just come off the press. It's headline reads, "X COLLEGE HAS A QUOTA SYSTEM." The lead story goes on to explain that a Campus Student Committee has just completed a survey revealing that the student body includes a mere handful of Jewish and Italian students and no Negroes. The

Committee used membership lists of campus organizations—religious, athletic, social, etc.—as well as the class lists and the student directories in obtaining the basic data. The article closes with a blunt statement challenging the President of "X" College, its Admissions Committee and its Board of Trustees to justify such a policy.

Bill Jones, the student editor (as well as a member of the Campus Student Committee) receives a note from the President requesting that Bill appear in his office the following morning. As Bill walks in, President Smith is seated behind his desk—with Dr. Williams, Dean of Admissions, and Mr. White, the Registrar, both seated on his left. President Smith motions to Bill to sit in the vacant chair to his right.

The group may feel that this is a good starting point for a first try—with the main objective stated as *What can Bill do to enlist the cooperation of school authorities?*

The members may want to decide beforehand some of the attitudes held by the various role-players. The President might be a strict disciplinarian and a strong believer in a quota system; or he might be a progressive educator who feels his own principles to be compromised by the existence of a traditional policy of exclusion of certain groups—or he might fall somewhere in between these two extremes. The Admissions Dean and the Registrar could portray the same sort of range of attitudes. Bill might be a thoughtful student who feels that certain objectives have to be worked for—carefully but earnestly. Or he might be a "hot-headed reformer" with little thought for the complexities of social action. Or again, somewhere in between.

The variations listed here do not exhaust the possibilities. Two persons may be instructed to handle a role in different ways. For instance, one member of the group may leave the room while the first Bill is trying his method. He will try *his* ideas about how Bill should act when the same scene is played a second time. There may be a reversal of roles—i.e., Bill and the President may trade roles for a re-playing of the same scene. This last variation is especially helpful for understanding how it feels to be in the other fellow's boots.

3. Those members not involved in the actual role-playing should be instructed to act as observers. They may be assigned to watch particular role-players or to look for important clues which come out in the role-playing.

For example, if there are four characters in the scene, as is the case here, the rest of the members may be divided into four sub-groups—the first to observe Bill, the next to watch President Smith, and so on.

4. The role-playing begins. It usually lasts from five to no more than ten minutes. The discussion leader or one of the members may cut the scene at a point where enough action has already occurred to provide a basis for discussion.

The role-playing should run long enough for the basic trend of the action to develop, for the relationships between the four characters to emerge, and for at least first steps to be taken in Bill's efforts to achieve his goal. By all means, the role-playing should be cut when the dialogue begins to repeat itself.

5. After the scene is cut, it is preferable to get the immediate reactions of the role-players — how they felt in their roles and how they responded to other

persons in the scene. Here it is helpful to use the role-name of the person so that he will not feel he is being evaluated personally.

When role-players succeed in really projecting themselves into the roles assigned them, they usually respond in such a manner as to give valuable insights into the problem under discussion and thus provide additional material for discussion.

6. The audience-observers may give their impressions as well as question the role-takers. Some of the points they might want to cover include:

How did each role-player feel as he acted the part?

How did the group think the role was handled? (This does not imply judgment on the basis of dramatic ability but rather of the role being played in relation to the way the group set it up.)

What were the good points of the action?

What were the mistakes or omissions?

What are possible suggestions for improving the action?

The above questions as well as others which may occur to the members can serve as the key approaches with which to look for important clues. (See point 4.)

7. The comments of the audience-observers constitute the heart of role-playing as a discussion technique. The actual role-playing is almost universally an effective stimulus for the participation of the entire group in the discussion. The comments on the specific problem can at that time be related back to the more general problem under consideration. The discussion leader sums up with the group the chief points which came out in the role-playing scene and the comments of the observers which followed.

After short experience with role-playing, most groups find that it is indeed a flexible tool and adapt it to best fit the needs of their particular group. However, it is also true that some groups have become so intrigued with it that they lose sight of their goal. As long as groups look upon role-playing as a *helpful technique*, such a possibility is not likely to occur.

For group leaders (and members too!) who would like to learn more about the ways in which this method has been used, the references listed on the back page may be helpful.

ROLE-PLAYING

Suggested Readings

Gilchrist, Robert S., Lothar Kahn and Robert Haas. *Building Friendly Relations,* College of Education, Columbus, Ohio, Ohio State University, 1947, pp. 29-34.

Here, role-playing was used with a group of 9th graders whose unfriendly attitudes toward their Negro classmates indicated a need for guidance. This method was successful in creating more favorable attitudes.

Grambs, Jean D. and Lucien B. Kinney. "Sociodrama in High School Classes", *Social Education,* December, 1948, v. 12, no. 8, pp. 341-343. Also reprinted in *Improving Human Relations* (Washington, D. C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1949) pp. 95-100.

A well organized article on the use of sociodrama in a classroom situation as an impetus to learning. The detailed account of the steps involved in putting on a sociodrama makes this a useful guide for the beginner.

Hendry, Charles E., Ronald Lippitt and Alvin Zander. *Reality Practice as an Educational Method* (Psychodrama Monographs, No. 9), New York, Beacon House, 1944. (Also available from Boy Scouts of America, New York City.)

This monograph is recommended as excellent resource material for those leaders who want one general piece which covers both the principles and application of this method.

Moreno, Florence B. "Sociodrama in the Sociology Classroom," *Sociatry,* March, 1948, v. 1, no. 4, pp. 404-413.

Sociodrama was used in an advanced sociology class of fourteen undergraduate nurses in order to clarify the problem of the nurse's relation to the varied community forces. The situation was a PTA meeting at which the typical community groups were represented. The inclusion of material on the setting of the scene as well as the discussion which followed, makes this a useful resource piece.

Sheats, Paul H. "Sociodrama as an Aid to Large Group Communication," *Sociatry,* March, 1948, v. 1, no. 4, pp. 431-435.

An excellent example of the effective use of this technique with a large group.

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